Good News in Tough Times

With the stock market plunging, unemployment topping 8 percent and Congress spending nearly a trillion dollars to stimulate the economy, many people in the U.S. have lost hope. The gloom crystallized in March 2009, when the World Bank warned we were sinking into the first global recession since World War II.

Nearly lost in this negative chorus is a gathering cloud of witnesses: Christian business executives and entrepreneurs whose businesses are prospering despite the downturn.

“The Lord isn’t broke, and He’s not in the recession,” says Paul LaRue, whose Nashville-based Just Me Music expects 300 percent growth in 2009, thanks to stocking products in entertainment giant Disney’s stores and other retail outlets.

LaRue sees current conditions as a time of testing, believing God will prosper those who are committed to doing His work.

“Jesus is in a good mood,” the charismatic businessman says. “The world would say, ‘You’re a nut.’ But the Lord is looking and saying, ‘Who can I trust?’”

Some other examples:

- Power Station, which operates a series of automated kiosks in airports and hospitals where customers can rent a laptop or download movies and games, expected to see 500 percent growth in 2009. That would be more than double its first-quarter gain.

“We’re figuring out how you do business God’s way,” says Chief Operating Officer Michael Cozakas. “We’re realizing some significant fruit. It’s the appearance of Jesus Christ in the marketplace.”

- The slowdown in Florida’s economy had construction magnate Brian Carroll so strapped for cash late last year that he faced restructuring to survive. While at the bank to take that step, he received a call. His company had won contracts enabling him to double his business in 2009 and open offices in two other states.

“When God moves, He moves,” Carroll says.

- Entrepreneur Don Lisle, whose small shop handles insurance and financial services, saw his business skyrocket in 2008 after several major clients implemented large projects.

“This is the season,” says Lisle, a top agent for a major insurance company’s California operations. “God would say He will supply our needs according to His great riches, not the [stock market].”

- Financial adviser Alan Johnston, who also serves as stewardship pastor at Abba’s House, a charismatic Southern Baptist church in suburban Chattanooga, Tenn., sees God’s hand behind this trend.

“God is faithful,” says Johnston, whose franchise outperformed its national chain’s peer group by 42 percent the first quarter of 2009. “When people do business by the Book, God honors that. My own business is [proof]. We pray every day, ‘God, bring us the people You want us to help.’”

Johnston also cautions believers to avoid getting swept away in the hysteria that has driven the stock market down.

He points to the Standard & Poor’s 500, a noted group of companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange. In early March he said the S&P had lost $114 billion over the last 15 months, with 10 of the 500 losing $131 billion. That means 490 in the index had decent years and some were profitable, Johnston notes.

That says to him that the problems aren’t nearly as pervasive as has been commonly portrayed. “When money flows a little more freely, business needs leverage, and we'll see this thing rise again," Johnston says.

Cozakas believes too many Christians are enmeshed in the fear that greeted the collapse of such corporate titans as Lehman Brothers and General Motors.

A member of C. Peter Wagner's network of apostles, he says instead of looking at the 70 percent of companies who are still OK, they focus on the 30 percent that have flopped.

"If you work in faith and not in fear, there are opportunities looking left and right," Cozakas says. "How do we harvest this instead of worrying about it? The body of Christ isn't seeing the truth of that yet. But God will bless the faithful. This is our time."

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John Ritenour

God has been teaching John Ritenour about maintaining a positive outlook in the current environment, and the chairman of Insurance Office of America (IOA) has numbers to back up his optimism. Even though he expects 2009 sales to remain flat, the company's stock value is rising.

The stock's value is foundational to the 650 people working at the employee-owned company, which primarily writes business insurance. With premiums based on payrolls that have shrunk lately, IOA's achievement represents a miracle to its chairman.

“We feel pretty good about that,” says Ritenour, who stepped aside as CEO last year in favor of his son, Heath. “Our earnings were flat, but we did some things right to make the bottom line better.”

If he chose to look on the down side, 2009 will mark the first time in a decade the company won’t register double-digit sales growth—although Ritenour views keeping pace with last year as equivalent to a 15 percent increase.

And though the economy has many executives wringing their hands, the elder at Grace Church in Longwood, Florida, maintains the opposite outlook. He keeps employees’ eyes off their tight finances by assigning two staff members to act as liaisons with charitable organizations.

“Our employees are involved in feeding the homeless and going to Ronald McDonald House and doing things they normally wouldn’t get a chance to do without the corporation … funding it,” Ritenour says. “As bad as it may be for them, it’s not as bad as being homeless or having medical issues.”

Wende Jones

Business for 5-year-old Agile Northwest in suburban Portland, Oregon, rose approximately 40 percent the first quarter, with President Wende Jones looking for a 100 percent increase for all of 2009. That could mean adding three employees, a 50 percent increase in full-time staff.

Jones expects profits from this growth to allow her to fund a planned charitable foundation, which she envisions will help the homeless and causes such as the International Christian Chamber of Commerce.

“It’s all God,” says Agile’s president, who attends a nondenominational, charismatic church. “We don’t have to operate in the world’s economy; we can work under God’s economy if we work in faith.”

The business owner sees personal prayer time as one of the keys to the company’s growth. Since attending a conference of Christian businesspersons last fall, she has been getting to the office early for two hours of prayer.

One thing the Holy Spirit has been revealing in these sessions is her need to relinquish control of her business, something the entrepreneur says is hard to do.

Still, God is answering as she asks questions such as, “What are You starting today? What do You want to put before me?”

“If you don’t get that grounding in the morning with the Lord, it’s tough,” Jones says. “When those phones start ringing, I’m ready. It’s critical to me to have that time.”

Paul LaRue

Paul LaRue, president and CEO of the suburban Nashville company Just Me Music, believes God not only gave him the inspiration for the company but also is spurring the company’s amazing growth. Through licensing agreements, Just Me produces personalized CDs and books that include a child’s name in stories featuring popular characters from VeggieTales, Barney, Mickey Mouse and others.

“Personalization is so huge. Now we have piles of buyers who want to bring in CDs to their stores.” Those stores include Disney-owned outlets, which recently started stocking CDs burned with the top 100 selling names that account for 50 percent of Just Me’s sales.

“Something happens when the Lord starts something—it activates things in the spirit realm,” LaRue says. “I believe He is preparing for people to carry significant wealth, but He's preparing us to carry the weight."

Thanks to the positive response to their products, the founder says he has gained an entrée with those who normally wouldn't listen to the gospel.

Kenn Renner

The number of real estate agents in the Austin, Texas, area has shrunk 30 percent since last year, reflecting a decrease in average monthly home sales in 2008 of more than 50 percent, according to Realtor Kenn Renner. However, after seeing his sales double the first two months over the same period last year, the head of Renner Realty is aiming for a 50 to 65 percent increase in 2009—he hopes to reach $20 million.

Symbolizing his optimism is the early March listing of an $800,000 home that sold in four days.

"We surrender the whole business to [God]," says Renner, a member of Glory House Christian Center. "With the power of prayer and our model of doing things—people are looking for that. They want encouragement."

Though an independent agent for 25 years, Renner says last fall God directed him to become an affiliate of Keller Williams Realty. The Austin-based franchiser is now the nation's third-largest residential real estate firm.

Renner liked the priorities of co-founder/chairman Gary Keller: God first, followed by family and then business.

"As a stereotype, [business owners] put business first," Renner says. "It's proven that God first is more biblical."

For every home sale, Renner Realty donates $360 to Fullness in Christ Ministries, a Texas ministry founded by charismatic pastor Ras Robinson. “It’s one of the ways I’m letting people know this is a Christian business,” Renner says.

David Green

After opening 19 stores in 2008, Hobby Lobby is aiming for 25 to 30 new outlets this year. It expects a 7 percent sales increase and a same-store sales (a standard retail industry measure) hike of 2 percent, reflecting gains the first two months of 2009.

Founder David Green attributes these numbers to divine blessings. During
a mid-1980s oil patch bust that brought the Oklahoma City-based business to the brink of bankruptcy, he learned that the point of his endeavors is God.

“We’re blessed,” says Green, whose family made national headlines when it donated $70 million last year to Oral Roberts University. “We feel like we’re trying to do the right thing and leave the rest up to the Lord, regardless of what it looks like on a spreadsheet.”

With some 18,000 employees and nearly 440 outlets, Hobby Lobby’s 2009 sales are expected to surpass $2 billion. Its five affiliated companies include the Christian bookstore chain, Mardel.

Saying that God taught him He hates debt, Green claims for the last several years the company has operated virtually debt-free, using only short-term financing of Christmas inventory. He says this ethic emerged from the 1980s, when it became clear debt in an economic slump can be fatal. The Lord also taught him lessons about pride during that time.

“He wants us to die to ourselves in our daily lives and our operations,” Green says. “I think those are the greatest things He’s trying to teach us.”

Another scriptural principle is remaining closed on Sunday. Adhering to this principle cost the company $100 million, or 12 percent of its overall business, when it made the change in the early 1990s.

Obviously, that decision hasn’t hampered Hobby Lobby. Green thinks its success, in spite of the bleak economy, shows God’s purpose—for Green to glorify Him in his life, family and business.

Though some might credit the chain’s performance to hard work, he says even that is a reflection of the Almighty.

“In the past I tried to make a lot of things happen and wished I hadn’t,” Green says. “We want to be more sensitive than we have in the past to His direction in our lives.”

Michael Cozakas

Not only does the company Michael Cozakas serves as chief operating officer expect a 500 percent increase in 2009, but during a one-year period ending in February, Power Station saw a 480 percent increase in its per-share value.

After starting this year with 35 employees, the private company has been adding staff and expects to reach almost 90 by late summer. Though not all are believers, everyone who sees Christian principles acknowledges they work, Cozakas says.

“We have worked hard to apply the gospel to the marketplace,” says Cozakas, who sold a high-tech innovation to IBM in 2002 and intended to retire—until God told him to give away his wealth. “Wealth is not about how much you keep; it’s how much you give away. The purpose of wealth is to distribute it.”

Still, investors want a return on their money. After watching corporate giants fizzle, he says many are looking for smaller companies where they can stay on top of their investments. The result for Power Station was that during the first quarter, the company raised $2 million and didn't have to chase a multitude of investors for it, Cozakas says.

He acknowledges that many Christian-owned businesses have endured tough times recently, yet insists such times of testing may be God's method of redirecting them.

" "I think the first thing people have to do is look at what they're doing [and ask], 'Is it really honoring God?' " he says.

Honoring God isn't simple, he admits. Cozakas points to a costly decision his company made this year to pick up insurance coverage for employees and their dependents after their payroll provider made a mistake.

"On the surface this appears to be unprofitable," he says. "But the Lord has blessed [us], and we are experiencing tremendous growth. This economy hasn't frightened us, and we see this as a great opportunity to become market leaders."